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CHAPTER 3

‘A Vertiginous Sense of Impending Loss’: Four Nations History and the Problem of Narrative

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This chapter seeks to argue that four nations interpretations of the modern history of Britain and Ireland have been overdetermined by a metanarrative of national decline or disintegration. Raphael Samuel captured this succinctly and eloquently in 1995 when he discussed the circumstances surrounding the emergence of four nations history in terms of ‘a vertiginous sense of impending loss’.[1] That sense of something important slipping away—whether it was the UK’s place in the wider world or the loosening of cohesive ideas of national identity at home—has motivated attempts to chart the complex historical relationships between the different parts of ‘these islands’. Understanding the origins of British institutions and identities in the past has never seemed more urgent than when they appeared to be in decline or undergoing dissolution in the present. This chapter questions the terms of that discussion by focusing on three areas that have been central to research in the field: the nature of

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the British state, how national identities are understood, and the ways in which transnational history presents opportunities for situating this history in an international and, indeed, a global context. It suggests that more systematic recognition of a metanarrative of decline has the potential to open up other avenues of enquiry and alternative interpretations.

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This argument requires a brief excursus into the circumstances that shaped the emergence of this field of enquiry, the reasons for the emphasis on decline, and an explanation for its enduring influence. A four nations approach to the history of Britain and Ireland arose out of a period of political uncertainty, institutional change and cultural dissension in the 1960s and 1970s. It occurred as a concerted response to a complex of developments that included decolonisation, the re-emergence of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland, the UK joining what was then the European Economic Community (EEC) and the abortive plans for devolution to Scotland and Wales. J.G.A. Pocock's 'plea for a new subject' in 1975 occurred against that background. Particularly relevant in his case was the United Kingdom turning away from the old settler colonies.[2]

The broad outlines of this context are well known and well-rehearsed, but their consequences for subsequent historical enquiry have not been fully explored. Most historians who responded to the plea for a more plural history were shaped by what Christopher Harvie has characterised as 'the moment of British nationalism', spanning the years between 1939 and 1970.[3] Harvie's 'moment' began with the Second World War, an experience that provided a new impetus to older ideas of British identity that were forged in opposition to an external threat, while the peacetime settlement reinforced pan-British solidarities through the welfare state.[4] It was a perception that such feelings of common interest were unravelling that provided the underlying rationale for four nations history. Locating historians who embraced a more plural interpretation of the British and Irish past in this context should not be taken to mean that they embraced nationalism, but rather that they had acquired a heightened awareness of the British dimension to the past in a discipline that, to a large extent, had been unreflexively Anglocentric.

A challenge to that entrenched view of the past was also made possible by the effects of institutional reconfiguration. University expansion and changes to the culture of academia in the 1960s and 1970s began to

transform the character of historical studies and created an environment conducive to experimentation with new approaches and methodologies.[5] Such changes both destabilised an existing paradigm and energised those who wished to work outside its frameworks. To use a concept devised by the cultural critic Raymond Williams, four nations history emerged in a particular 'structure of feeling', an idea he also formulated in more general terms as 'the culture of a period'.[6] These developments inspired some historical studies that focused on the formation of the United Kingdom in the eighteenth century, whereas during the 1990s 'dissolution' emerged as a new metanarrative of modern British history.[7]

This was demonstrated by the titles of a number of books during the 1990s, all of which ended with question marks. These included an important collection of essays called *Uniting the Kingdom?*, published in 1995, *Kingdoms United?* and *A Disunited Kingdom?*, which appeared around the time a devolved parliament and assemblies were being established.[8] These question marks clearly reflected uncertainty regarding the relationship between the apparently disintegrative tendencies of the present and how they might have consequences for interpretations of the past. Samuel summed this up in lyrical fashion by channelling Hegel: 'History notoriously takes wing at dusk, that twilight hour when shadows lengthen, silence thickens and when (according to believers in the numinous) thought flies heavenwards and ghostly presences makes themselves felt.'[9] Such uncertainties about British state development have continued. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, tensions over the UK's relationship to the European Union (EU), the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the rise of Scottish nationalism raise the question of whether separate national traditions of writing history in Britain and Ireland will be reinforced. Alternatively, new spaces for re-appraising four nations history in a more holistic way might emerge.[10] The historians who seek out those spaces have not been shaped by Harvie's 'moment of British nationalism' but by a post-imperial moment of sustained contention over the nature, size and shape of the state—politically, economically, militarily and culturally—that began in the 1970s and continued through the re-structuring of economic relationships and civic identities that took place between 1979 and the end of the twentieth century.[11] This is a different (albeit related) 'structure of feeling' to that which gave rise to four nations history in the first place, and it is one that has implications for the three themes considered below.

Feelings of 'crisis' and dissolution have influenced historical interpretations, albeit not always in a straightforward or linear fashion. Richard Weight's study of national identity in Britain in the sixty years after the iconic date of 1940, for example, is 'about why the people of Britain stopped thinking of themselves as British'. He argued that England, Scotland and Wales were 'locked together'—a significant phrase—over four centuries, in 'an uneasy relationship'.[12] In this interpretation the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the unilateral declaration of a republic in the south in 1949, together with the imposition of direct rule in Northern Ireland in 1972, underline an uncompromising emphasis on dissolution as the guiding theme of recent British history. It is about how the unifying experiences of the Second World War and the post-war welfare state unravelled over time: by the closing decades of the century the 'moment' of British nationalism was decisively over.[13] This is an example of how a perception of national decline since the 1960s has over-determined the framework for discussion, rather like the debate about British economic decline since 1945. The validity of conceptualising post-war Britain in terms of a stark polarisation around 'growth' and 'decline' has been the subject of debate, and a discussion of the British state and Britishness in terms of an opposition between integration and dissolution is also needed.[14]

This brief discussion of the origins and development of four nations history (its 'structures of feeling') alerts us to two things: first, that contemporary events have been central to its emergence and development; and, second, that there now exists a body of work in the field whose achievements can be evaluated. Consequently, it is possible to reach some conclusions about the intellectual 'shape' and direction of four nations history as it applies to the modern period and the key areas of enquiry that have attracted historians' attention to date.

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One interpretation of a four nations approach to British and Irish history is that state formation should be the main focus of enquiry,[15] and that (implicitly) a centralised form of historical enquiry should take precedence after Great Britain was established in 1707.[16] It is perhaps in this area that the application of four nations history to the British state faces one of its biggest challenges, having to confront a deeply embedded view of English state development that restricts its attention to the emergence

and establishment of centralised institutions. The challenge for historians lies partly in the fact that there is an older structural problem deriving from the relationship between the study of the state and the professionalisation of History as a discipline in British academia at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The chronology of that professionalisation meant that it had a distinctive relationship to the study of state structures, which in turn reflected a particular interpretation of the 'English' state. This is important because at the time, the development of state institutions was considered the 'proper' subject matter of history. According to Michael Bentley, 'The British state congealed, in political terms, before the professionalisation of history began in Britain', whereas the processes often went hand-in-hand in other countries.[17] It might be said that no new national narrative was required for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland because central state institutions appeared to be largely unchanged following the parliamentary Unions of 1707 and 1801. Bentley argued that 'British historians assumed the existence, in a fit of absence of mind, of a British state as an extension of an English one; and it was this state that they tended to consider.'[18] The study of English state structures became the metanarrative of professional history in its formative years in the nineteenth century, and its echoes can still be heard in the interpretations of both professional and popular historians.[19] Establishing History as a discrete subject in the universities meant policing disciplinary boundaries; privileging the study of the state was part of that process.

Rather than being a product of the period of the state's formation and growth, therefore, a four nations approach to the history of Britain and Ireland has arisen as a response to the perceived decline or potential dissolution of that state. In other words, it is a response to what is seen as an existential structural crisis in the fabric of the state, and this has determined the terms of debate. For some commentators, it is only the apparently disintegrative tendencies in contemporary life that have exposed the 'hiddenness' of territorial relationships that have always been present but which have been concealed by the ideology of English constitutional development.[20] It is recognition of the 'hiddenness' and anomalies of the condition of being a state with (at least) four nations that make an historical interpretation based on plurality so significant.

The nature of the state and its relationship to territoriality is often neglected in accounts of its development, such as conceptions of Britain changing from a fiscal-military state in the mid-eighteenth century to a

laissez-faire state by the mid-nineteenth.[21] However, a comparison of the Scottish and Irish unions, and the way in which some political scientists now think of the United Kingdom as a state with different types of union, suggests that there is more to be said about the territorial dimensions of centralised state structures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[22] The idea of the UK as a unitary state in which territorial questions were considered irrelevant or of marginal importance once dominated political science, but a new formulation in terms of a 'union state' has taken its place. This view insists on the continuing salience of territorial politics in spite of the existence of centralised state institutions.[23] According to the political scientist James Mitchell, the UK is 'a centralised and pluri-national state'.[24] Mitchell has taken this way of conceiving of the state a step further with the suggestion that the term 'a state of unions' captures more effectively the dynamic nature of the different types of union that co-exist in the UK and the different relationships that have developed over the centuries in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.[25] The nature of what might be characterised as 'union politics' was not fixed but protean, a feature that can be counted as one of the key reasons for its continued strength, especially in Scotland but also in parts of Ireland.[26] The study of such phenomena indicates that an opposition between centralisation and 'disintegration' is not the only leitmotif of histories of the state and its institutions. Instead of seeing a break-up of Britain, Mitchell describes a 'Scottish Question' that is about how Scots have negotiated their position in the Union over two centuries. This is a deeply historicised analysis and one that points in the direction of alternative ways of understanding the development of the British state. Thinking about the UK as a union state, or a state of unions, questions both a linear narrative focussed on the growth of central institutions and one that portrays such institutions as unravelling over time.[27] Approaching the history of the British state from the perspective of more than one centre permits a consideration of those aspects of the British state and its activities that have had deeply territorial dimensions over a long period; against that background, the creation of devolved legislatures for Scotland and Wales at the end of the 1990s can be seen as a transitional phase in British state development rather than necessarily being a crisis arising from a process of disintegration. Centralisation and diversity have always been in tension, albeit to different degrees at specific times.

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If there is one particularly well-developed field of enquiry associated with an attempt to write a plural history of Britain and Ireland it is how historians have tackled the emergence of Britishness as an identity and the extent to which it has lain on top of or displaced older identities. This is an important area of analysis partly because of the multinational character of the state and partly because of the widely held view that Britishness is a civic identity, in contrast to the supposedly 'ethnic' identities of the sub-state peoples. In 1975 Pocock identified nationality as one of the central methodological problems of the new field. Much of the debate on this question has centred on Britishness and the study of events and ideologies that have been responsible for national integration; however, in practice this has been a 'three nations' history.

In her landmark book, *Britons*, Linda Colley charted the creation of Britishness between the Act of Union with Scotland (1707) and the accession of Queen Victoria (1837): during this period Britishness was 'forged'.[28] In one sense, her conclusion parallels that of E.P. Thompson's iconic study of the English working class, which (he argued) was 'made' by the 1830s.[29] While Colley focused primarily on the making of a truly British elite and Thompson analysed the working class, both approaches to this formative period can be characterised as portraying the United Kingdom, and especially England, as precociously modern. However, neither process—nation building nor class formation—can be considered finished by the early nineteenth century and in both cases continued to be negotiated (glaringly so in the case of the late 1830s and 1840s, when the combination of Chartism and the Irish Repeal movements challenged the state in fundamental ways).

Colley's emphasis on the centrality of a Protestant identity to official British patriotism has tended to obscure the denominational fractures that sometimes took an ethnic character or were formed along national lines. The bitter split in the Scottish kirk over church patronage and, by implication, ownership of the 'nation' in 1843 (the 'Disruption') was one example of the tensions within Protestantism, whereas from 1847 the struggle between nonconformists and Anglicans over who spoke for the Welsh people emphasised further divisions. Protestantism might be more usefully seen as a marbled identity, with internal fissures and fault lines that caused cracks in public unity.

Colley's analysis of the cohesive nature of Protestantism and an engagement with empire was complemented by an insistence on the shaping of Britishness in opposition to external enemies, and in particular around war with continental 'Others'.[30] To this extent, it can be seen as being complementary to the argument concerning the existence of a fiscal-military state to 1815, although it fits less easily with the picture of a laissez-faire state in the Victorian era. Colley insisted that the creation of Britishness did not entail the undermining of other national identities in Britain but rested on top of them. She contended that a blending of identities did not take place, and we should see the creation of Britishness in terms of the coming together of nations rather than their integration into a new identity.[31] The extent to which such interpretations are applicable outside periods of war is more debateable. Keith Robbins, for example, in his study of the nineteenth century has taken a different line by emphasising that integration involved to some extent the erosion of the identities of the constituent nations of Britain, as well as reducing regional differences.[32]

The terms of the debate about the emergence and cultivation of British identities relied to a large extent on whether elites or popular identities were prioritised. In some ways, these different views of Britishness simply reflect the extent to which a sense of national identity was mobilised in European society as a whole in the two periods under discussion by Colley and Robbins. In others, however, they reflect different approaches to historiography: the one allowing for a complementarity between Britishness and the subordinate nationalities of the United Kingdom as distinct entities, the other emphasising that Britishness involved the creation of a hybrid identity. These characterisations not only matter as historical questions but also because they have implications for discussions about Britain in the present. Considerations of national identity in the twenty-first century frequently turn around similar polarities. During the referendum campaign on Scottish independence in 2014 even the Scottish National Party (SNP) recognised the existence of a 'social union' between Scotland and the rest of the UK, consisting of 'connections of family, history, culture and language', a formulation that implies acceptance of the idea that there had been some blending between countries over time. This was based on an historical understanding of the nature of Union and the intertwined relationships and identities it had created.[33] Here is an example of how contemporary events have helped shape a research agenda and, in turn, of how the products of that research inform how we frame current political debate.

Much of the work about Britishness can be summarised as being about how the successful integration of Britain (rather than the United Kingdom) took place, and on what terms. Consequently, this debate revolves around an opposition between integration and diversity. One notable feature is the tendency to exclude Ireland from the discussion of Britishness.[34] This exclusion has tended to produce teleological histories that emphasise the increasing success of Britishness as an umbrella identity in the modern period, almost as an antidote to the perception of dissolution in the present. Such an interpretation can be sustained only as a result of the prior decision not to take full account of the problematic consequences of the Union with Ireland. It must be recognised that this decision to separate the histories of Ireland and Britain is one that is apparently welcomed by some (though by no means all) Irish historians; the fear is that the 'new' British history is 'an attempt to assert at the level of culture and history a structure that has begun to crumble in the real world of politics'.[35] Such tensions appear at the interface between the metanarrative of dissolution and the invention and development of Britishness as a national identity from the eighteenth century onwards.

The inclusion of Irish experiences in the historical discussion changes our view of the emergence and development of British identities in the modern period by introducing an internal 'Other' following the Act of Union of 1801. Because loyalty to Britain was a minority phenomenon in Ireland, Britishness inevitably became a site of contention there. Historians such as Christine Kinealy have used the Irish case to address the broader question of integration and diversity in the UK, arguing that 'Ireland became a catalyst for change'.[36] The idea that union with Ireland produced conditions that precipitated change in the UK—as opposed to being a 'problem' lying outside, or in opposition to mainstream British narratives—is an important one, both because it raises questions about a linear interpretation of British national development and because it encourages a centred approach to understanding how a centralised polity managed increasingly intractable territorial problems within its borders. How the Union was negotiated in the Irish case had consequences for the otherwise different cases of both Scotland and Wales by focussing discussion on a variety of grievances in those countries that might not have gained traction in British politics had the 'Irish Question' not prised open spaces in which they could be discussed and validated. For example, nineteenth-century campaigns for land reform in Scotland received a major fillip from Irish agitations and legislation that was designed to deal with distinctive Irish conditions. The success

of Church disestablishment in Wales (achieved in 1919) was inconceivable without Irish disestablishment in 1869, which set a precedent for breaking the link between Church and state for a specific territory within the UK. Such developments underline the significance of conceptualising the UK as a state of different unions with asymmetric relationships. This situation produced cultural and political dynamics that are difficult to accommodate in a model of core-periphery relationships that starts from a consideration of conditions at the centre and treats different experiences as a largely uniform 'fringe'.

The inclusion of Irish Unionism further complicates the idea of what British national identity means, and it presents the paradoxical picture of a form of Britishness that was both loyalist and destabilising to existing political conditions. An emphasis on the particularity of the historical conditions that produced such a situation is appropriate but in the same way that Irish nationalism had echoes in the politics of Scotland and Wales, Irish Unionism created alliances in Britain.[37] Furthermore, the connections between Unionist Ireland and Britain are underlined by Irish Protestant migrants to Britain who ensured that the Orange Order thrived in some British towns and cities. Its activities in these places illuminate patterns of religious sectarianism in towns and cities on both sides of the Irish Sea, thus collapsing the conventional divide between the histories of the two countries.[38] At some points in modern history, it can be argued, the Irish Sea area makes a more compelling cultural-geographical context than one based on nations, whether Irish or British. This is particularly true of the connections between Ulster and Scotland.[39]

This brings us back to the influence of ideas of dissolution in the present. One curious consequence of an agenda driven by a debate over national decline as a result of devolution to the Celtic countries is the way it has produced few sustained discussions about how England relates to a wider British context. If including Ireland in accounts of Britishness creates problems for unitary narratives of British history, then so does the history of England, for different reasons and in different ways, and it presents challenges for attempts to write a plural history of Britain and Ireland. This is the elephant in the four nations room. Any attempt to construct a four nations narrative immediately comes up against the demographic and political weight of England, thus raising the question of the extent to which England and Englishness can be separated from a broader British identity since the eighteenth century. Recognition of

the fact that 'Englishness was the core of Britishness, even if it was not synonymous with it'[40] has led to the accusation that four nations history is little more than the old English history dressed in new clothes. As the dominant constituent part of the UK, England is difficult to accommodate within this perspective precisely because in population terms it is so large in relation to Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and it became progressively so during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In that context, how does the idea of the British state as one composed of different unions—a state of unions—apply to the territory at its core—England?

An indication of the challenges can be seen in the multi-volume New Oxford History of England. Reviewing Boyd Hilton's monumental study of the period from 1783 to 1846, Linda Colley asked how a history of England could be 'isolated and reconstructed' from the complex transnational and, indeed, transcontinental connections that shaped British history.[41] Hilton achieved this by largely focusing on elites and on southern English elites in particular. Another contributor to the series, K.T. Hoppen, took a different approach by including chapters on Scotland, Wales and Ireland in his study of the mid-Victorian decades.[42] As these contrasting examples demonstrate, defining how England relates to the polity it has dominated is no easy task. One way ahead would be to recognise that the UK has been an asymmetric multinational state and that a four nations history of that state and its peoples must be asymmetrical too. Perhaps we need to return to Pocock's formulation for inspiration here: that British history should properly denote the 'plural history of a group of cultures situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier and marked by an increasing English political and cultural domination'.[43]

It is along this line of division, and sometimes of assimilation, that the connection of Englishness to Britishness can be most profitably studied. Studies of English identity become particularly relevant in that context.[44] Krishan Kumar argues that 'English national identity cannot be found from within the consciousness of the English themselves', a conclusion that points to the need for both a consideration of the boundaries of the varieties of Englishness in Britain and Ireland and of how they have been constituted by international interactions.[45] At the other pole to international dimensions to English identity is the construction and expression of regional identities and their complex relationships to Englishness. This is particularly evident in the tenacious binary opposition in popular culture and political discussion between 'North' and 'South', two categories that are as much about cultures and values as they are about geography

and economy. The extent of regionalism and the relationship between regions and southern elites is an uneasy dimension to this history. In other words, English identity is a contested discourse that fractures along the lines of region as well as social class; in some interpretations, the two intertwine. A more textured analysis of English identity can (and in some cases has) reveal the patchwork nature of Englishness in which not only the category of 'England', but also homogenising formulations of 'North' and 'South', is questioned.

Pocock's use of the term 'frontier' points towards how borders have been both created and erased over time, and the complicated ways in which administrative, cultural and linguistic boundaries have shifted.[46] However, this approach has yet to be fully developed as a way of addressing the complexity of interactions across the islands in the modern period. Key themes such as maritime trade, migration, technological transfer and material history are potentially rich and fruitful areas of enquiry, as shown by research on Irish migration to Britain which points to the possibilities of this approach.[47] Changing linguistic boundaries are not only features of the Celtic countries, although they have particular relevance there.[48] A study of regions and their relationships to other regions and nations, not just in England, is one way of problematising the idea of the nation;[49] perhaps a difficulty in applying a systematic regional model to Britain has deterred historians from embracing the region as a building block of analysis, favouring the older administrative unit of the county instead.[50]

Considered in the round, the study of Britishness has worked in well-worn historiographical grooves and has been methodologically timid. An obvious gap in approaches to the history of the twentieth century is the use of oral history and memory studies.[51] Biography also promises to supply new insights into the complexity, instability and malleability of identities. One example demonstrates the potential benefits. Although not in the front rank of labour leaders, Huw T. Edwards (1892–1970), known in the 1950s as 'the unofficial Prime Minister of Wales', has attracted scholarly attention for the way his life embodied both British and Welsh identities. His activities as a trade union leader and prominent figure in public life after 1945 make him an ideal vehicle for teasing out the complex intersection of class, region, nation and gender, and how the expression of such identities varied from one social domain to another.[52] What social anthropologists have called 'thick description' is relevant here. The self-fashioning of individuals like Edwards points

towards a complexity that goes beyond an opposition between integration and dissolution,[53] and biographical studies demonstrate that hybridity and overlapping identities are not exceptional.[54] Similarly, an interrogation of identity from the perspective of migrants and ethnic minorities complicates the picture further by posing the question of how identity formation has taken place in relation to internal 'Others'.[55]

An example of the paradoxical consequences of identity formation can be shown by a brief examination of the autobiography of Pat O'Mara, who grew up in Liverpool as the son of Irish migrants before the First World War. His autobiography is an act of self-fashioning as an 'Irish slummy', an ethnic identity rooted in precarious social and economic conditions and a particular type of working-class community. He described the 'intense religious atmosphere' of his Catholic school, where children were 'rather patriotised and Britishised', until they returned home where they were 'sternly Irishised'. He outlined his complex identity as an adult as 'something like this: ferocious, sacrificial Irish-Catholic (die for Ireland's freedom) first; ferocious sacrificial patriotic Britisher second; and patient, wondering dreamer third'. He claimed that 'what is true of me is true certainly of most slummy Irish-Catholic "Britishers".'[56] How individuals such as this negotiate contradictions in the different layers of their identities is often obscured in general narratives.

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If Britishness and national identity have been key threads of four nations history, then the transnational and global dimensions to that history have also been important. This is one way of moving an introspective discussion of national identity onto a broader canvas.[57] How such an approach might be mapped onto four nations history presents a number of different, albeit overlapping, paths, from a concern with 'Greater Britain' and the Atlantic, to empire, globalisation and the so-called 'British world', and it poses the underlying question of 'dissolution' in different ways.[58] Such concerns speak to a post-imperial malaise and a search for international relevance in a changing world; after all, the area where the metanarrative of dissolution most clearly applies is that of the empire, if only because the British Empire is definitively over.

The formulation of a research agenda for the 'new' British history in the 1970s initially looked in a different direction, emphasising Atlantic contexts, but while this has been a particularly productive area of study for early modernists, it is more problematic to situate the history of

Britain (perhaps less so in the case of Ireland) *primarily* in that context for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[59] To be sure, Atlantic interactions, migration and exchange have been integral parts of the modern experience,[60] while the idea of a 'Black Atlantic' has also gained purchase.[61] Transatlantic perspectives on the racial violence that broke out in Britain after the First World War, for example, have provided new insights,[62] and the themes of Americanisation and Atlanticism in the twentieth century are important areas of enquiry. However, for much of the modern period it is the empire that furnishes the main transnational context for understanding interactions with a wider world. This loops back to the earlier discussion of the nature of the British state by posing the question of whether we should think of it as an empire state as well as a union state and whether the end of empire precipitated a crisis in that state.[63]

Assessing the impact of the end of empire depends in part on the prior question of the extent of popular imperialism in the preceding centuries. A discussion of how far the British and Irish peoples embraced empire, or were affected by it, has often been viewed through the lenses of social class and gender. By contrast, the doyen of imperial historians, John M. Mackenzie, has argued persuasively for a 'four nations' approach to the history of the empire as well,[64] thus promising to reassess familiar themes of commerce, conquest, Christianity and decolonisation by adding nation and ethnicity to class and gender. For example, the distinctive Scottish engagement with empire demonstrates a layering of Scottish, British and imperial identities that can be traced through to the 1960s.[65] The impact of the end of empire on Scottish society is a matter of some debate, with Bryan S. Glass insisting that the rise of Scottish nationalism from the 1960s can be explained—at least in part—by the decline of Scottish engagement with empire.[66] This is another intersection of perceived disintegration in the present being reflected in interpretations of the past. If the United Kingdom and empire were mutually constitutive, then the decline of both can be seen as reinforcing developments. Furthermore, if such a relationship is accepted, it is clear that this operated in different ways and to different degrees in the constituent parts of the country.

The Irish and Welsh encounters with empire present distinctive ways of thinking of the imperial experience, whether such encounters were military, commercial or religious. Missionary activity brings this dimension out particularly clearly. As has been argued above, the outer shell of a common

Protestant culture in Britain papered over a diverse and often fractious set of denominational cultures that sometimes mapped onto national differences, and those differences were refracted through missionary engagements with empire. What it meant to be a Welsh-speaking Calvinistic Methodist missionary in the hills of Khasia, in what is now Bangladesh, was different to being a minister of the Scottish kirk in central Africa or an English Anglican vicar in Australia; yet all would probably have considered themselves British to one extent or another, and all were implicated in the geopolitics of empire.[67] Similarly, various forms of Irish engagement with the imperial venture have navigated the tortuous boundary between being both a coloniser and the object of colonisation.[68]

Discussing empire in this way prompts a consideration of how British legacies appear from the former settler colonies, such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand.[69] Awareness of being part of a new phase of globalisation—possibly a defining feature of the current 'structure of feeling'—has led to the promotion of the 'British world' as a subset of global history. This is intended to move beyond a study of links with the settler colonies, or even the formal and informal empires, to embrace a truly global perspective. At a time when the UK's place in the world is uncertain, this field boldly asserts 'Britain's central role as the proximate cause of the modern world configuration', thus making British history 'central, vital and irreplaceable to modern history'.[70] It is concerned with questions of diaspora, culture and identity,[71] and it implicitly rejects a narrative of dissolution. This conception of a plural and diverse British world has been facilitated by new technologies such as digitisation that have made empirical research on a transnational scale a practical proposition; it signals a move away from a feeling of post-imperial malaise to a more self-confident narrative of British success in shaping modernity. However, such a shift is not without its own problems. Modernity is not a value-free or one-dimensional concept, and the extent to which Britain shaped the world or the world shaped it remains a live question.

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While the themes discussed here are not the only ones of significance in four nations history as it relates to the modern period, they provide an indication of the challenges faced by historians. This chapter has situated the emergence of the field in a particular 'structure of feeling' and has discussed the metanarrative of national dissolution that has underpinned it.

It has argued that we need to pay closer attention to how contemporary events have influenced historical interpretations, in particular the unravelling of the 'moment of British nationalism', the re-constituting of the state along new lines in the late twentieth century, and the impact of another phase of globalisation. Grappling with the post-imperial implications of Britain's place in the world has been a significant backdrop to four nations history. To this extent, it mirrors the debate about British economic decline since 1945.

In 1990 Keith Robbins—one of the pioneers of 'four nations' history—reflected that there seemed to be 'an increasing recognition that a subtler and more variegated modern "British" history is necessary', although he added that 'no one would claim that there is a simple or single framework for it'.[72] Raphael Samuel alluded to a similar point when he wrote: 'Being polycentric it [four nations history] has no natural heartland or consecutive narrative.'[73] An overriding feature of four nations history has been a determination to question narratives of a unitary British past and to ask what a national past might mean. An integral part of this questioning has been the rejection of Anglocentric narratives of British history that were established in academia when History was first professionalised as a discipline and, according to some historians, a rejection of national narratives altogether in favour of a multi centred, more complex approach.[74] Although 'four nations' history (by its very terminology) can be seen as a way of replacing one form of nation-centred analysis with another, its disruption of existing narratives also creates spaces for interrogating the nation as a framework for historical analysis.[75]

Using the methodologies of, for example, comparative history is an obvious way around the homogenising tendencies of national frameworks, providing one way of capturing the totality of the complex historical relationships in these islands, and of addressing the asymmetrical nature of those relationships and their transnational dimensions. Scottish-Irish comparisons of the social, economic and cultural history of the two countries, for example, have been successful in de-centring British history by creating an alternative socio-geographical axis.[76] Similarly, comparative analysis of the Irish and Scottish Unions also challenges established ways of seeing British history from the perspective of the centre, while at the same time engaging with the state and its institutions.[77] Including the apparently anomalous position of Wales in that discussion complicates the position further because of that country's

absorption into English state structures in the sixteenth century and the gradual process of establishing a new national institutional framework and identity from the second half of the nineteenth century. Research on areas such as the land question,[78] monarchy,[79] social policy,[80] women's suffrage,[81] and schooling[82] has demonstrated how starting with what is perceived as the margins of the United Kingdom can change our views of familiar topics, thereby unveiling the 'hiddenness' of a plural and asymmetric history in the process. This has the advantage of enabling systematic cross-fertilisation of research from different national historiographical traditions in Britain and Ireland, and beyond. How the four nations' past was racialised and gendered remains to be fully explored.

This chapter began with a brief exploration of how the unravelling of post-war solidarities from the 1960s was a distinctive 'structure of feeling' that embedded the metanarrative of dissolution alongside that of perceived economic decline. This often resulted in discussions that revolved mainly around the opposition of integration and diversity. It has been supplanted by a different, but comparable structure of feeling among historians who have been shaped by a neo-liberal consensus about the state and globalisation. The referendums on Scottish independence in 2014 and the UK's membership of the EU in 2016 suggest that a metanarrative of dissolution will not be superseded soon: conflict and division in the present will undoubtedly continue to spur historians to discover comparable phenomena and diversity in the past. However, this is a restricting framework for understanding the full breadth and complexity of interactions across Britain and Ireland in the past. By contrast, Tom Nairn—a writer who did more than most to embed a perception that the UK had entered a period of disintegration by popularising the term 'the break-up of Britain'—asked in 2001 whether devolution had fashioned a new union, rejecting 'the gloomy prognosis of "four nations" doomsterism'.[83] If loss and a sense of impending doom have been the guiding lights of four nations history, it might be time to return to Pocock's emphasis on a plural British and Irish past that recognises and explores hybridity without being constrained by an opposition between integration and dissolution. Shifting cultural and political boundaries need not be the same as disintegration.

Moving beyond a polarity dictated by this underlying narrative structure entails embracing a research agenda that recognises the territorial dimensions of the UK state as an essential, rather than an incidental, feature of its composition and history. This means not only exploring the

different national cultures of the state but also working into that account an awareness of how the concentration of institutions of government in the south-east corner of England has often obscured centre-periphery relations, inside England just as much as between England and the other nations. A way of doing this is to conceive of modern British and Irish history in terms of a series of asymmetric developments rooted in uneven and shifting relationships and identities over time. A framework of this kind does not lend itself to obvious popular narratives but it does promise a richer and more textured history that takes fuller account of what is a complex past.

Notes

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5. K. Robbins (2004) 'British History and the Generation of Change' in H. Brocklehurst and R. Phillips (eds.) *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain* (Basingstoke), pp. 3–9.
6. R. Williams (1979) *Politics and Letters* (London), pp. 156–72.
7. A. Aughey (2001) *Nationalism, Devolution, and the Challenge to the United Kingdom State* (London).
8. A. Grant and K.J. Stringer (eds.) (1995) *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (London); S.J. Connolly (ed.) (1998) *Kingdoms United? Great Britain and Ireland since 1500: Integration and Diversity* (Dublin); C. Kinealy (1999) *A Disunited Kingdom? England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1800–1949* (Cambridge). See also G. Burgess (ed.) (1999) *The New British History: Founding a Modern State, 1603–1715* (London); T. Claydon and I. McBride (eds.) (1998) *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850* (Cambridge).
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11. S. Howe (2003) 'Internal Decolonization? British Politics since Thatcher as Post-Colonial Trauma', *Twentieth Century British History* (*TCBH*), 14, 3, 286–304.
12. R. Weight (2002) *Patriots: National Identity in Britain, 1940–2000* (London), p. 1.
13. An indicator of the influence of contemporary events is L. Colley's (2014) book of her radio series, *Acts of Union and Disunion: What has Held the UK Together – and What is Dividing It?* (London). Compare this with the title of her influential 1992 book, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London).
14. J. Tomlinson (2016) 'De-industrialization not Decline: A New Meta-Narrative for Post-War British History', *TCBH*, 27, 1, 76–99; K. Robbins (2010) '1968: Declining Identities—Religion and Nation in the United Kingdom', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions und Kulturgeschichte*, 104, 35–50.
15. S.G. Ellis (1995) 'Introduction: The Concept of British History' in S.G. Ellis and S. Barber (eds.) *Conquest and Union: Fashioning a British State* (London), p. 4.
16. David Cannadine claimed that the British perspective has greater relevance to some periods than others in his 'British History as a "New" Subject: Politics, Perspectives and Prospects' in Grant and Stringer (eds.) *Uniting the Kingdom?*, pp. 12–28. But see: N. Evans (1988) 'British History: Past, Present—and Future?', *Past & Present*, 119, 171–203.
17. M. Bentley (1993) 'The British State and its Historiography' in W. Blockmans and J-P. Genet (eds.) *Visions sur le développement des États européens: Théories et historiographies de l'État moderne* (Rome), pp. 153–68 (157–8).
18. Bentley (1993) 'The British State and its historiography', pp. 157–8. Bentley also comments on the acceptance of a narrative of absorption in popular histories of the British state.
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20. J. Freedland (2015) 'This Pre-Election Jockeying is Threatening the Union', *The Guardian*, 31 January; A. Aughey (2003) 'On Britishness', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 14, 55.

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24. J. Mitchell (2013) *The Scottish Question* (Oxford), p. 15; I. McLean and A. McMillan (2005) *State of the Union: Unionism and the Alternatives in the United Kingdom since 1707* (Oxford).
25. Mitchell, *The Scottish Question*, p. 289.
26. Jackson, *The Two Unions*; D.G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.) (2001) *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish Unionism since 1801* (London); and references in P. O'Leary (2016) 'States of Union: Modern Scotland and British History', *TCBH*, 27, 1, 124–43.
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29. E.P. Thompson (1968) *The Making of the English Working Class*, (Harmondsworth, rev. edn).
30. L. Colley (1992) 'Britishness and Otherness: An Argument', *JBS*, 31, 4, 309–29.
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32. K. Robbins (1988) *Nineteenth-Century Britain: England, Scotland and Wales: The Making of a Nation* (Oxford); K. Robbins (2008) 'L'histoire britannique et la "Britishness"', *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle*, 37, 111–26.
33. The Scottish Government (2013) *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland* (Edinburgh), p. 215.
34. Both Colley and Robbins have written perceptively about Britain and Ireland elsewhere.
35. S. Connolly, 'Introduction' in Connolly (ed.) *Kingdoms United?*, p. 9.
36. Kinealy, *A Disunited Kingdom?*, p. 4.
37. J.A. Loughlin (1995) *Ulster Unionism and British National Identity since* 1885 (London).

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51. However, see: M. Rawlinson (2015) 'Memory and Nation in British Narratives of the Second World War after 1945' in Bragança and Tame (eds.) *The Long Aftermath*, pp. 114–28.
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55. Williams, 'British Identities', p. 549.
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